

CSCE NEWS RELEASE

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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Lukashenka Cited for Violations of OSCE Principles and Deteriorating Human Rights Situation in Belarus

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Washington, DC—The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe today released the text of a letter sent to President Alyaksandr Lukashenka of Belarus on April 3 critical of his government's violation of OSCE principles and of the country's deteriorating human rights situation that calls for him to live up to his obligations under international law. The letter was signed by Commission Chairman Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-C-NY), Co-Chairman Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), Ranking Minority Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Ranking Minority Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-MD).

Full text of the letter follows:

"Dear President Lukashenka:

"We are writing to express our heightened concern about the further deterioration in the human rights situation in your country and to protest a series of actions by your government in blatant violation of OSCE principles and norms.

"Within the last few weeks, two American citizens, including a U.S. diplomat, have been expelled from Belarus. First Secretary Serge Alexandrov was unjustly and illegally detained and expelled for observing an opposition rally, a routine practice of diplomats. A few days earlier, on March 16, Belarusian Soros Foundation Executive Director Peter G. Byrne was prevented from re-entering Belarus, detained, held incommunicado for over 12 hours in flagrant violation of diplomatic and consular conventions in effect between the United States and Belarus, and forcibly expelled the next day. Mr. Byrne ostensibly

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The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe by law monitors and encourages progress in implementing the provisions of the Helsinki Accords. The Commission, created in 1976, is made up of nine Senators, nine Representatives and one official each from the Departments of State, Commerce and Defense. For more information about the Commission, please call (202) 225-1901.

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was expelled for illegal activity, but in reality, was expelled for supporting efforts to develop Belarus' fledgling civil society.

"These expulsions come on the heels of other repressive actions, including arrests and beatings of demonstrators who have been protesting your policies over the last few months. Organizers of these rallies, such as former Chairman of Parliament Mechyslau Hryb have received stiff fines or have been arrested and jailed for up to 15 days. We are alarmed by reports of beatings that resulted in injuries and detentions of several hundred protestors and journalists during yesterday's demonstrations in Miensk.

"We are deeply concerned about the Belarusian Government's restrictions on the right to freedom of speech and assembly -- as manifested by your March 5 decree which also bans the display of Belarusian national symbols at rallies -- and the arrest of peaceful protestors, as well as journalists, at a number of these rallies. We are also alarmed by the political intimidation of leading opposition figures, as illustrated by police visits to their homes demanding they admit they violated a presidential edict that restricts demonstrations, and by police searches of various political party headquarters. In February, two opposition leaders were attacked in Miensk in separate incidents by unidentified assailants under suspicious circumstances. Also, we have received reports of the intimidation of university professors and other examples of crude threats by police against democratic activists.

"We are especially troubled by the plight of Henadz Karpenka, Deputy Chairman of the 1996 parliament and chair of the opposition shadow cabinet, who was on a hunger strike to protest the special police guard placed outside his ward in a hospital where he is currently a patient.

"Another example of apparent intimidation is the March 10 decree calling into question important tax exemptions granted to the Belarusian Soros Foundation and other non-governmental organizations and the March 18 announcement that all nongovernmental organizations in the country will be investigated. We understand that these investigations by government security officials have commenced.

"Furthermore, freedom of the media in your country continues to be assailed, most recently by the withdrawal of press accreditation from and the expulsion of Russian NTV reporter Alexander Stupnikov, the March 23 decree banning of several Russian television networks from broadcasting footage from Belarus, and the recent announcement by your government that all foreign journalists must obtain new accreditations.

"Earlier this year, OSCE Chairman-in-Office and Danish Foreign Minister Helveg-Petersen, urged your government to take action to respect fully OSCE norms, principles and commitments, to enter into dialogue with the opposition and to ensure freedom of media. Unfortunately, actions since that time have only further called into question your government's commitments under the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent OSCE agreements. We urge you to take to heart the concerns of the OSCE and

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other international entities, as well as individual countries, including the United States, and to begin to reverse the serious deterioration of human rights that has occurred in your country during the last year.

“Mr. President, last week you spoke to your countrymen about the international isolation that Belarus is now facing. The best way that you can prevent this international isolation, if you so desire, is to live up to obligations you have freely undertaken as an OSCE member.”